

Vision, Values and Hope for Change

In order to be active we need a picture of what we want to change for the better, and a belief that we can make an impact. Without this, our activism can start to feel pretty hopeless and futile! Burnout can also result when we feel stretched from our own values. Take some time to fill out this sheet – you may want to pin it up or keep it handy, so you can check if you are staying true to these beliefs, or if they've changed and you need to reassess what you're doing.

I have a **VISION** for a better world. It looks like...

I have **VALUES** that guide me in my activism. They are...

I **HOPE** to change the world. What makes me feel hopeful is...

Preventing Stress and Burnout as part of Organisational Culture

Some Recommendations

1. Create a group culture / ethos that supports self-care, balance and sustainable work loads and patterns.
2. Take a long-term perspective of planning and working for the long haul, to keep experienced / skilled group members for as long as possible.
3. Balance task focus with process and relationship / maintenance focus - in meetings, in daily work, in planning, and in evaluation.
4. Provide workshops / training in stress management and burnout prevention - can be as part of conferences, gatherings or ongoing training / orientation.
5. Use regular planning and evaluation as a tool to reduce stress.
6. Build stress level checks into reviews and evaluations - how stressed do people feel? What is contributing? What do we need to do about these?
7. Put stress prevention strategies on the agenda for meetings.
8. Allow people to express feelings of distress, grief and loss and frustration - regard them as normal and healthy responses to unhealthy situations and state of the world.
9. Provide individual or group debriefing after critical incidents or high stress campaigns. Keep an eye open for vulnerable individuals and see intervention as valid.
10. Create support structures, eg supervision, mentoring, support / affinity groups, larger group workshops.
11. Put value on socialising, fun, humour, relaxation time as a group.

Katrina Shields, from the **Essential Skills for Environmental Activism** training manual (Papers from the first National Environment Movement Training Programme - Adelaide, 1996), National Environment Movement Training Support Group, November 1997

http://www.earthshare.org.au/training/pdf/training_manual.pdf

Sustainable Activism

Working for Change, Enjoying Yourself, Avoiding Burn-out!

Quotes

‘Burnout is an occupational hazard for high achievers with high ideals’
– Patricia Vigderman

‘Burnout is the index of the dislocation between what people are and what they have to do. It represents an erosion in values, dignity, spirit and will – an erosion of the human soul’
– Christina Maslach, *Burnout – The Cost of Caring*, 1982

‘There may well be a vast ocean of suffering out there that requires my attention, but how much of my workload is self-imposed based on my own work-ethic? And how does the way I work impact on my colleagues? What are my expectations of the hours people are supposed to be working in my (workplace)? What are the non-material ways (if any!) in which I reward myself and my co-workers? How much do I contribute or detract from the sense of community in my workplace? What are my true values around my work?’
– Mark MacDiarmid, ‘This House is on Fire: Burnout and CLCs’, *On the Record*, Vol 5 2004

‘We just assume that the mission (or work) is more important than our personal needs. This is where a fundamental contradiction sets in. Those of us who are burnout-prone are also sensitive people who have feelings, want to be liked and recognized, and wish to do worthwhile things for other people. We want to do well and look good in the eyes of our peers, but unfortunately our peers are usually in the same dilemma. They also play down personal needs.’
– William Bryan, *Preventing Burnout in the Public Interest Community*, 1980

‘We must be the change we wish to see in the world’
– Mohandas Gandhi

Activist’s Commitment

I have chosen to change society, but I also choose to be intelligent in the way I go about it.

The future needs me well-rested, well-nourished, and well-exercised.

The past is useful as a source of information, but never as a substitute for my own fresh thinking.

If I am not enjoying what I am doing, then there is something wrong with how I am doing it
and I will correct it.

- Re-evaluation Counselling (Co-counselling)

Some things to consider

- Don't let work take over
 - Define attainable goals
 - Find a balance of competence and challenge: 'One way people burn themselves out is to take on the tasks that are too easy or too hard for them. In the first case people get bored; in the second, they get overwhelmed. What works best is to find a balance between areas of mastery and areas of challenge'
 - Increase structure, supervision and feedback
 - Delegate, Delegate, Delegate!
 - Enjoy the work and have fun
 - Use time well
 - Face and resolve conflicts
 - Relax!
 - Let go of guilt, resentment and fear
 - Create a vision for your life: 'The most effective people tend to have dreams, plans, and visions of the future. Some idea of where they are going promotes a sense of hope and well-being in their lives and provides something to shoot for beyond the here and now. Having such a vision or dream helps maintain a clear and balanced perspective on the present'.
- Lakey et al

References

Two great articles:

'Pacing Yourself For The Journey: How To Avoid Burnout And Thrive While Working To Change The World', Chapter 15 of *Grassroots And Nonprofit Leadership* (1995) Berit Lakey; George Lakey, Rod Napier, and Janice Robinson, New Society Publishers

'Survival Tactics (How to Spark Without Incineration)', Chapter 11 of *In The Tiger's Mouth: An Empowerment Guide For Social Action*, Katrina Shields (2000) self published.

Please note: These articles focus on personal strategies to prevent burn-out. However, both books are highly recommended for broader information relating to community organisation development, planning, sustainable activism and service delivery, and creating organisational and group cultures which guard against burn-out. Both books can be ordered through Anarres, the anarchist bookclub, at www.anarres.org.au (Group Dynamics page), or check your library.

See also the Activist Trauma Support website (www.activist-trauma.net), and the Training Resources – Personal Development and Life Skills pages on the Change Agency website (www.thechangeagency.org)